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Comparing sites or following flows? Finding an appropriate methodology for understanding a connected world

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In its founding years, comparison was the cornerstone of our discipline. But, its fame was limited and with the growing critique of scientific generalizations the comparative agenda lost prominence. At the height of the postmodern debate, Marcus proposed “multi-sited ethnography” as an alternative paradigm to understand social processes in an increasingly globalized world. This paper examines both paradigms and asks which advantages and disadvantages they have. For this purpose I present ethnographic data about the social engineering of water governance in rural Namibia. In the course of political “decentralization” and inspired by CBNRM policies born in Rio and Dublin in the early 1990ies, Namibian pastoralists have had to develop new rules how to share water and the costs involved in providing it. While all communities were exposed to similar blueprints and development models, today social practices differ and those differences can be explained. I show that while multi-sited ethnography is important it runs danger to miss contradicting evidence. Multi-sited ethnography is thus more prone to lead to verifications of initial assumptions than other research designs.

Michael Schnegg (Paul-Lazarsfeld-Visiting-Professor) is Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Hamburg, Germany. He has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico and Namibia. His current research focusses on understanding how people value and govern nature in Southern Africa. In addition, he has published on social networks and sharing.